

put them before Canadian audiences. It was this aspect that most impressed the author of *The Week's* strikingly enthusiastic review of *Roland Graeme: Knight* in 1892. In that novel, the reviewer suggested, Machar had taken up concerns just beginning to absorb the attention of a few Canadian clergymen.<sup>70</sup>

With her moderate approach, Agnes Machar was helping to prepare the ground for the Salem Blands and the J.S. Woodsworths of a later generation, and going as far with her reformism as was consistent with maintaining the sympathy and respect of the late-nineteenth-century Canadian Protestant conscience. In the several facets of her defence of Christianity she was a striking representative of what Jane Addams called 'that "between-age mood" in which so many religious contemporaries ... were forced to live.'<sup>71</sup> The moderate stance was of Machar's own choosing, of course, but as a female product of her particular time and place she probably could not have sustained a more radical one.

70 'Roland Graeme: Knight,' x (25 Nov. 1892), 826. The reviewer cited George Grant as an example of a minister who had recently demonstrated a concern for the very issues raised in the novel: 'Examine his ~~own~~ effort before the Pan-Presbyterian Council and it will be found that it is in the spirit of "Roland Graeme," - in fact there is hardly a thought of that address that could be matched by a corresponding thought from this book.' The reviewer could have cited the example of another Presbyterian, the Rev. John Clark Murray, a McGill philosophy professor much concerned with the mutual obligations of labour and capital. His manuscript, 'The Industrial Kingdom of God,' has recently been published in book form with an introduction by Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott (Ottawa 1981).

71 *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York 1905), 190-1.

JOHN D. THOMAS

## *Servants of the Church: Canadian Methodist Deaconess Work, 1890-1926*

THE CANADIAN METHODIST DEACONESS MOVEMENT occupied an important position in the intricate web of early twentieth-century women's benevolent and reform organizations. Between 1894, the year of its foundation, and 1926, when it merged with its Presbyterian counterpart in the United Church of Canada, the Methodist Deaconess Society trained more than 900 women for volunteer work or employment in the fields of religion and social service.<sup>1</sup> The 235 women who became Methodist deaconesses and deaconess probationers served in churches and welfare institutions across Canada and Newfoundland as case-workers, teachers, and nurses. The deaconess order, or diaconate, performed no liturgical or meditative functions; deaconesses were the foot soldiers of Methodist applied Christianity.

The largest and the most influential of the several Canadian deaconess movements, the Methodist Society has been recognized as a major contributor to the development of women's religious and social

The author wishes to thank Ruth Compton Brouwer, Ramsay Cook, Neil Semple, and Clara Thomas for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article, one of which was presented to the 1982 meeting of the Canadian Methodist Historical Society.

1 By 1922, 930 students had registered and by 1925 over 500 had graduated from the Training School. The majority of graduates became deaconesses or missionaries, the remainder finding employment with the YWCA, the WCTU, the Woman's Institute, and similar organizations. United Church Archives, Toronto [UCA], Deaconess Society of the Methodist Church, boxes 4 and 5, *Year Book of the Deaconess Society of the Methodist Church 1921 and 1922* (previously *Annual Report of the Toronto Deaconess Home and Training School of the Methodist Church*) [ARDS], 28; *Methodist Church National Training School Bulletin 1917-18* [Bulletin or Calendar], 4; *Christian Guardian* 30 Aug. 1916, 18; United Church of Canada, *Records of the Proceedings of the First General Council* (Toronto 1925), 1970.



service work.<sup>2</sup> Yet historians have also noted that the Methodist deaconess movement harboured a narrow conception of women's church work, illustrating the extent to which organized religion constricted and subordinated the contributions of its women workers.<sup>3</sup> Meeting neither the aspirations of its deaconesses, nor the expectations of Methodism, after 1910 the order entered a period of decline from which it never recovered.

A history of Methodist deaconess work illustrated the ironic bequests of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century maternal feminism. Under the impress of intellectual ferment and rapid social change some Canadians challenged prevalent sexual stereotypes; but equal rights feminism was overshadowed by a more conservative 'social service' feminism which sought a public role for women in harmony with the maternal virtues ascribed to them by contemporary thought. The bittersweet fruits of industrialism, most reformers argued, both made imperative and made possible the inclusion of those social responsibilities in women's separate sphere that would help to check the disintegration of the family.<sup>4</sup> A product of this maternal feminist impulse, the foundation and growth of the Methodist deaconess order also testified to the strength of an idealist reform gospel whose common denominator was the conviction that evangelical concern should be accompanied by a comprehensive conception of religion's

<sup>2</sup> *The First Fifty Years 1895-1945: The Training and Work of Women Employed in the Service of the United Church of Canada* (Published by the Committee on The Deaconess Order and Women Workers, the United Church Training School, and the Woman's Missionary Society of the United Church of Canada, n.d.), 4-8; William Magney, 'The Methodist Church and the National Gospel, 1884-1914,' *The Bulletin*, xx (United Church Archives 1968), 20. I have endeavoured to correct the factual errors in Magney's synopsis of deaconess work.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Headon, 'Women and Organized Religion in Mid and Late Nineteenth Century Canada,' *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society*, xx (March-June 1978), 15-16; Wendy Mitchinson, 'Aspects of Reform: Four Women's Organizations in Nineteenth Century Canada' (Ph.D. thesis, York University 1976), vii, 88-91. Diane Haglund's 'Side Road on the Journey to Autonomy: The Diaconate Prior to Church Union,' *Women, Work and Worship in the United Church of Canada*, project compiler Shirley Davy (Toronto 1983), 206-27, came to my attention after this article was accepted for publication. Had Haglund been able to consult the Methodist Annual Conference Minutes, the deaconess work Annual Reports, and the unpublished sources of Methodist deaconess work, she undoubtedly would have avoided several errors of interpretation and emphasis. Our common use of maternal feminism as an organizing construct, however, leads to generally similar conclusions.

<sup>4</sup> Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred?: The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto 1983); Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto 1979), especially Kealey, 'Introduction,' 1-14, and Wayne Roberts, 'Rocking the Cradle for the World: The New Woman and Maternal Feminism, Toronto, 1877-1914,' 15-45

culture-building mission.<sup>5</sup> Yet the growth of non-sectarian women's social service work based increasingly on a secular, professional legitimacy - a development in which the reform gospel would play a part - limited the need for an order. Nor was maternal feminism a uniformly proscriptive monolith. Its sister institutions proved more attractive alternatives to women than did the diaconate, for most of its history an unsalaried, highly disciplined calling. After 1910 deaconesses played a role in modifying the strictures of the order in the hopes of bolstering their status and autonomy. So too did the managers of deaconess work seek to strengthen its credentials; but so strong was the current of maternal feminism that few Methodists pinpointed the fundamental flaw of the work.

Alfred Moore Phillips, a noted temperance leader, Methodist clergyman, and exponent of women's special mission in social reform, played a primary role in the foundation of the Methodist deaconess movement, as did Mrs Uzziel Ogden, a member of a prominent Toronto Methodist family, whom Phillips interested in the work.<sup>6</sup> Ogden and Phillips were by no means alone in their conviction that 'the uplifting of society depends upon women, and without her aid society cannot go forward.'<sup>7</sup> By the mid-1880s Methodism was searching for an institutional means of better enlisting women's powers in the service of the Church. Although a diaconate was not the only option to be considered,<sup>8</sup> the sound reputation of deaconess work in Europe and the United States impressed a growing number of Methodists who shared their enthusiasm for the movement from the pulpit, the platform, and in the Church press.<sup>9</sup> Promoters found in St

<sup>5</sup> Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto 1973); 'Introduction: The Background of the Social Gospel in Canada,' *The Social Gospel in Canada*, ed. Richard Allen (Ottawa 1975), 2-34; see also A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal 1979), 216-28.

<sup>6</sup> *The First Fifty Years*, 5; UCA, Deaconess Society of the Methodist Church, boxes 1 and 2, Deaconess Society Board of Management Minutes, Vol. 1 (DSBM 1-5), 5 Feb. 1897, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Moore Phillips, *My Message: Being Extracts from the Pulpit and Platform Address of the Late Alfred Moore Phillips*, compiled by Nettie Phillips Watt (Toronto 1897), vii, 18.

<sup>8</sup> The 1886 Methodist General Conference recommended that the Woman's Missionary Society take on the responsibility of training men and women 'auxiliaries' for the purpose of nursing and evangelistic work among the poor. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Methodist General Conference, 1886* [Journal], 270. There is no record of the WMS considering the recommendation at its subsequent annual meetings.

<sup>9</sup> William H. Withrow, editor of the *Methodist Magazine*, was a fervent deaconess promoter. He reprinted numerous British and American descriptions of the work and solicited material from Canadians. *Methodist Magazine*, xxxiv (Sept. 1891), 250;



Paul's commendation of Phoebe of Cenchrea and other women labourers in the gospel a New Testament sanction for the employment of deaconesses, or servants of the Church, as they often translated the term. They celebrated the origins of modern deaconess work in Protestant Germany during the 1820s, its subsequent world-wide expansion, and in particular its adoption by the influential American Methodist Episcopal Church in 1888. In Canada, enthusiasts held, deaconess work was but a natural evolution from traditional women's church and sabbath-school work, and a requisite addendum to the missionary, bible woman, and city mission work they had more recently begun.<sup>10</sup> To legitimate deaconess work then, and to win the firm support of fellow members of the clergy and the professional and business class who largely determined Church policy, was the fundamental task of its promoters.

'Why should not the Church interest itself in the bodies and brains as well as the souls of its people?' an American deaconess promoter asked a Toronto audience.<sup>11</sup> Her Canadian counterparts shared the desire to challenge narrow interpretations of the Churches' function and to broadcast the tenets of applied Christianity, just as they sought to inform Methodists that, in an age marked by spiritual and social unrest and growing rifts among the classes, much of the work could be entrusted to these servants of the Church. Deaconesses had a mission to rich and poor alike, but it was the work among the latter that promoters emphasized. They were 'the bridge over the vast gulf between yourselves and the very poor.'<sup>12</sup> As spiritual tutors deaconesses solved 'the problem of "how to save the masses" by resolving the masses into individuals, and then influencing those individuals by the power of personal effort and love.'<sup>13</sup> Among the poor as agents of socialization, they exerted 'a powerful influence toward making respectable citizens of the disturbing element.'<sup>14</sup>

Not the least of the deaconess's responsibilities, promoters maintained, was to serve as a role model for women. For those who took up the work it channelled female energies in the proper direction and 'provided a noble antidote' for educated women in danger 'of

and LIX (Mar. 1904), 208. The movement also enjoyed the support of Edward Hartley Dewart, editor of *The Christian Guardian*, 3 July 1889, 424.

10 *Methodist Magazine*, xxx (Oct. 1889), 383; xxxi (Jan. 1890), 44-53; xxxii (Aug. 1890), 130-1, 139; *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Church [Minutes]*, 1892, Toronto Conference, 60.

11 *Methodist Magazine*, XLVIII (Sept. 1898), 210.

12 *Ibid.*, LVII (Apr. 1903), 347.

13 *Ibid.*, xxxi (Jan. 1890), 49.

14 *Ibid.*, XLV (June 1897), 523.

becoming mere aesthetic *dilettanti*, of cultivating a refined selfishness.'<sup>15</sup> While deaconess work gave women an important function in the life of the Church, promoters were quick to reassure anxious Methodists that established institutions and patterns of authority would remain intact. They responded to the criticism that founding an order 'would have the effect of keeping all other women out of church work'<sup>16</sup> by insisting that a diaconate be regarded as an important supplement to, not replacement of, existing denominational and non-denominational women's organizations. Neither would a diaconate become a rival to the sanctity of the home; nor would it pose a challenge to the hegemony of clergymen. 'Many pastors,' a woman noted, 'are finding in the assistance of these "elect ladies" relief from minor duties that enable them to overtake the more important obligations of their office more effectively.'<sup>17</sup> 'I believe ... Deaconesses stand co-ordinate with deacons or preachers,' a principal remarked, and her pronouncement was justified by the conviction that deaconesses performed those chores of applied Christianity which belonged in women's domain: 'Whoever heard of a minister going round to nurse the sick? ... Again, look at the rescue work the Church must engage in ... All of which illustrates this fact, that as long as men only are set apart to do the work of the Church in the world, it will only be half done.'<sup>18</sup>

As the campaign in the Church courts to establish deaconess work revealed, the precedents of Salvation Army, Church of England, and Roman Catholic organized women's work served both as a complicating nuisance and as a rallying call to action. Methodism had to be assured that the unrespectable evangelical excess it often associated with the Salvation Army would be avoided, just as it had to be convinced that the foundation of a woman's order did not represent 'the thin edge of the wedge' of ritualist influence.<sup>19</sup> Anti-ritualist prejudice lay deep within Methodism, and promoters of a diaconate, themselves often disdainful of the contemplative and liturgical roles of nuns, stressed by way of comparison the practical nature of deaconess work.<sup>20</sup> When they did acknowledge the contribution of nuns to benevolent work, or of Salvationists to evangelical work, they were quick to hint darkly that Methodist inattention to this sphere would

15 *Ibid.*, LIV (July 1901), 84.

16 *Christian Guardian*, 8 Oct. 1890, 644.

17 ARDS, 1905-6, Deaconess Aid Society, 53.

18 *Methodist Magazine*, XLV (June 1897), 520.

19 *Christian Guardian*, 8 Oct. 1890, 644.

20 *Ibid.*, 15 Oct. 1890, 664; *Methodist Magazine*, xxxiv (Sept. 1891), 257; ARDS, 1896-7, Deaconess Aid Society, 6.



result in the loss of converts to the former and the loss of women workers to the latter.<sup>21</sup> At the quadrennial Methodist General Conference of 1890, the Committee on the State of the Work initially responded to a joint memorial from Montreal and Toronto promoters by reporting that while it was in full sympathy with the principle of employing women church workers, it was nevertheless opposed to the foundation of an order at that time. Only a spirited defence of deaconess work by promoters from the floor of the Conference staved off total defeat. Their resolution declaring bluntly for its establishment lost, but they did win permissive legislation. 'If deemed desirable' the regional Annual Conferences could henceforth begin work. Deaconesses, however, would be prohibited from engaging in the seemingly unmethodistic practices of taking vows; neither would life-long service, nor enforced residence, nor uniform dress be required of them.<sup>22</sup>

Promoters evinced no interest in questioning the first two prohibitions, but they did seek to structure deaconess work with icons and institutions calculated to enhance its authority and build an esprit de corps. The 'distinctive garb' of deaconesses, they maintained, was a 'means of economy,' a 'protection and a passport,' a 'bind of sisterhood,' and modest in comparison to that worn by Salvationists and nuns.<sup>23</sup> Nor were deaconess homes 'hot-houses for the cultivation of religious mysticism,' but rather 'centres of outreaching ministry' and havens of comfort for the deaconesses who resided in them.<sup>24</sup> Although mandatory residence and uniform dress would become features of deaconess work once it was established, the investigatory committees struck by the 1891 Montreal and Toronto Annual Conferences wisely avoided the issues in their explanatory reports to the 1892 Conferences. Their wisdom was rewarded. Both Conferences cleared the way for the work to begin.<sup>25</sup>

Only Toronto Methodism would commence deaconess work, however, a reflection of its superior numbers, its greater wealth, and its dynamic leadership. A diaconate was only one of several new agencies it established in an effort to combat the centrifugal forces at work in an increasingly stratified industrial urban order.<sup>26</sup> The division of

<sup>21</sup> *Methodist Magazine*, xxxi (Jan. 1890), 52; *Christian Guardian*, 8 Oct. 1890, 644

<sup>22</sup> *Journal* (1890), 121, 321; *Christian Guardian*, 8 Oct. 1890, 644

<sup>23</sup> *Methodist Magazine*, xxxi (Jan. 1890), 53; *LIV* (Aug. 1901), 184

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi (Jan. 1890), 53

<sup>25</sup> *Minutes*, 1892, Toronto Conference, 60-2; Montreal Conference, 79-81

<sup>26</sup> Montreal supporters could not muster sufficient support. *Minutes*, 1893, Montreal Conference, 79. See Samuel F. Hays, 'The Changing Political Structure of the City in Industrial America,' *Journal of Urban History*, 1 (Nov. 1974), 6-34, for a brief explanation of the experience of American churchmen.

Toronto into relatively distinct socioeconomic communities by 1890, together with the declining rate of growth in church membership<sup>27</sup> and a sluggish economy, combined to leave some Methodist churches poorly supported. In response, well-to-do Methodists led by the wealthy Massey family founded the Methodist Social Union in 1892. Although its objectives included the consideration of all questions germane to a recently united Methodism, it quickly became pre-occupied with finding systematic, city-wide solutions to the problems of church finance.<sup>28</sup> In 1894 these same Methodists founded the Toronto City Mission Society of the Methodist Church, which largely superseded the independent efforts of congregations to reach the growing but unchurched population of the city core by centralizing the work at Hart Massey's new Fred Victor Mission. A diaconate proved to be an important auxiliary to these institutions, the Fred Victor in fact becoming its largest single employer.<sup>29</sup> In June 1893, a month after Hart Massey received a permit for construction of the new Mission, the Toronto Conference authorized the establishment of a deaconess work Board of Management.<sup>30</sup>

Composed equally of clergy, laymen, and laywomen, the Deaconess Society Board of Management quickly organized a city-wide ladies' Deaconess Aid Society and began to lay the institutional and educa-

<sup>27</sup> Peter G. Goheen, *Victorian Toronto, 1850 to 1900: Patterns and Process of Growth* (Chicago 1970), 219-21; George Cornish, *Cyclopaedia of Methodism in Canada*, 11 (Toronto 1903), 367-8

<sup>28</sup> Wealthy Methodists like the Masseys were inundated with requests for assistance from congregations which could no longer meet their financial commitments. The Social Union took on the tasks of policing and subsidizing financially embarrassed churches, many of which were located in the new working class suburbs of Toronto. UCA, Metropolitan Church, Toronto, Home Missionary Society Reports, 1888-93, C.D. Massey to C.D. Daniel, 27 Sept. 1892; Methodist Social Union of Toronto, Minutes from 15 Mar. 1892 to 7 Mar. 1905

<sup>29</sup> UCA, Minutes and Treasurer's Reports of the Toronto City Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1894-1906

<sup>30</sup> City of Toronto Archives, Building Permit 1301 1/2, 8-9 May 1893; *Minutes*, 1893, Toronto Conference, 61. C.D. Massey represented his family on the Board. For explicit reference to the Masseys as founders of deaconess work, see Public Archives of Canada, Massey Family Collection, MG A1, vol. 21, file 1914B, George Bishop to C.D. Massey, 15 Oct. 1914. The foundation of deaconess work should also be seen within the context of Hart Massey's unsuccessful campaign for appointment to the Senate. The Massey benevolence of this period, which also included the Toronto Massey Music Hall, was undoubtedly what Hart Massey was referring to when he reminded a prominent clergyman of his 'public work' and asked for the support of the Methodist hierarchy. Vol. 3, file 1893 O-P, Hart Massey to the Rev. Dr Potts, 27 Feb. 1893. Massey went so far as to promise a politician that, if appointed, 'the Gov't may be assured of almost the entire support of the Methodist body.' Vol. 3, file 1893 S, Hart Massey to the Hon. Frank Smith, 28 Feb. 1893



tional foundations of the work. In May 1894, the Toronto Deaconess Home and Training School formally opened, housing a total of six deaconesses and candidates by the following January. That its first principal was Alice Thompson, an American deaconess, was only one example of the strong links that Toronto promoters had forged with the Chicago Methodist Episcopal Training School, a pioneer in American Methodist deaconess work. The Chicago School not only supplied seven of Canadian Methodism's first twenty-seven deaconesses, but was in a general sense the model after which the Toronto work was patterned. Promoters borrowed liberally from the rules and regulations governing Methodist Episcopal deaconess work when they designed their program, and the Chicago School provided its Toronto counterpart with promotional literature and fund-raising speakers.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the assistance of the Chicago promoters, the Toronto work grew slowly. With only the Fred Victor Mission paying for the services of deaconesses, the Board divided the city into four districts and placed the remaining deaconesses under the supervision of selected pastors. More complex was the arrangement of a course of study. Not until 1896, when members of the Victoria College faculty volunteered to take over much of the teaching of Training School students from an ad hoc group of clergy and laity, was their education put on a firm footing. Most worrying was the financial indebtedness of the Board and the Deaconess Aid Society. The decision of several churches to hire deaconesses and a provision in Hart Massey's will leaving the interest accruing from \$10,000 to the work each year considerably brightened its prospects. Massey benevolence did not end here. The Home and Training School was much too small to meet the needs of even a modest number of women. In 1898 the Board eagerly accepted a Massey offer to provide a larger facility on the condition that it assume the cost of necessary alterations to the building. By the spring of 1899 the new and well-equipped \$18,000 Deaconess Home and Training School housed twenty-three women, including eleven deaconesses and deaconess probationers.<sup>32</sup>

Deaconess work, a promoter remembered in 1905, had been 'undertaken amidst general apathy and some opposition on the part of those outside the few who saw open up before our beloved Church a

31 Over the years, however, the addition of representatives from other Methodist agencies to the Board of Management gradually reduced the proportion of women members. *Minutes*, 1892, Toronto Conference, 60-2; DSBM 1 and 2, 1893-1904. Thompson's successors, Jean Scott (1896-1907) and Ora McIlhenie (1907-11), were also ME deaconesses.

32 DSBM 1, 25 Sept. 1893, 1, to 2 Dec. 1898, 160; ARDS, 1895-6, Deaconess Aid Society, 6; 1898-9, Board of Management, 3

sphere of usefulness for women.' Her candid admission of the movement's inauspicious beginnings demonstrated the confidence that promoters exuded during the early years of the new century.<sup>33</sup> After 1900 the Laurier boom, the continued patronage of wealthy Methodists, and vigorous explanation and promotion combined to vitalize the work. The number of deaconess candidates grew as did the demand for their services and the resources with which to support them. In 1901 twelve women entered the order, more than enough to meet the requests of Toronto Methodism for deaconesses that year. The Board immediately placed a deaconess in Hamilton, and in 1902 it met requests from Picton, Montreal, and St John's.<sup>34</sup> By 1906 forty-nine deaconesses worked in thirteen Canadian and Newfoundland communities. To support the burgeoning movement, six Annual Conferences eventually followed their Toronto counterpart in establishing Conference Boards of Management, and the 1906 General Conference passed legislation creating a nationally represented General Board of Management. The following year promoters began to search for a new Toronto Home and Training School site. In 1909 construction began at an estimated cost of \$130,000. Although the training remained centred in Toronto, several of the other Annual Conference Boards also founded deaconess Homes. By 1910 eighty deaconesses worked in more than two dozen communities from the Atlantic to the Pacific.<sup>35</sup>

The 'Fred Victor would be an impossibility without our deaconesses,' a superintendent of the Mission exclaimed. 'Without the deaconesses our mission work could not possibly be carried out with so little cost on so extensive a scale,' another superintendent added.<sup>36</sup> Churchmen representing scores of Methodist institutions must have echoed those sentiments between 1894 and 1926. Although promoters had originally conceived of deaconess work as encompassing visiting (evangelistic) and nursing duties, the establishment of a trained and inexpensively maintained women's order helped to launch institutional church work. Under the supervision of the pastor, a deaconess bore the weight of much of this work, her primary responsibilities including the poor, the old and the infirm, women and children. Some

33 ARDS, 1904-5, Deaconess Aid Society, 52. Similar comments on the apathy and opposition which met the work before 1900 may be found in: *Methodist Magazine*, LIV (July 1901), 83; LIX (June 1904), 563; LXII (Nov. 1905), 475; ARDS, 1900-1, Deaconess Aid Society, 11; 1905-6, 52; 1903-4, Board of Management, 3.

34 DSBM 2, 28 June 1901 to 6 Feb. 1903; ARDS, 1900-1-1904-5

35 DSBM 2, 1 May 1903 to DSBM 4, 8 Apr. 1910; ARDS, 1905-6-1910-11

36 *Christian Guardian*, 12 Dec. 1906, 8; UCA, *Lights and Shades of City Life: The Story of the Work of the Fred Victor Mission* (Annual Report, Toronto 1900), 18



churches were equipped with kitchen facilities, reading rooms, gymnasias, even bowling alleys and tennis courts, but the most complete expressions of the institutional church were facilities like the Fred Victor Mission and Winnipeg's All People's Mission. Here several deaconesses together offered a wide program of religious, educational, and recreational activities designed to convert the sinner, 'upbuild' the believer, comfort the distraught, and instil in their charges those values which Methodists deemed essential to leading a productive Christian life. Deaconesses also supervised mothers' meetings, savings banks, poor funds, used clothing outlets, and fresh milk campaigns. In the words of one deaconess, they operated 'a great department store.'<sup>37</sup>

Non-denominational organizations such as the London YWCA also employed deaconesses, as did a Methodist orphanage in Newfoundland, a Methodist low-cost women's residence in Toronto, and other denominational institutions. But deaconesses did not enjoy a monopoly of the growing number of positions open to women in Methodist urban church work. Toronto is a case in point. By 1922 the Methodist churches and agencies of that city employed eighteen deaconesses; yet the number of employed women workers exceeded thirty.<sup>38</sup> Many of these women were also graduates of the Deaconess Home and Training School, known after 1910 as the Methodist National Training School. From the beginning promoters intended to play a central role in the education of Christian workers. Women's Missionary Society candidates and other interested students first joined deaconess candidates at the Home and Training School in 1895.<sup>39</sup> By 1916 the Training School offered several distinct courses of study, including city, home, and foreign missions; social service; religious education; and deaconess work. Of these four programs enrolment in the latter barely exceeded 40 per cent of the total number of students.<sup>40</sup> Increasingly, the diaconate faced stiff competition for the services of Methodist women, just as the proliferation of specialized courses of study signalled the steady division of labour within the church and social service sectors. For the most part, deaconesses remained pastors' aids engaged in visiting and institutional church work.

By the same token, the diaconate failed to become largely a nursing

<sup>37</sup> *Methodist Magazine*, LIV (July 1901), 84. J.S. Woodsworth's *My Neighbour* (1911; new ed., introd. by Richard Allen, Social History of Canada Series, Toronto 1972), 196-211, is the most accessible overview of institutional church work.

<sup>38</sup> *Journal*, 1922, 331; UCA, *Programme, Eleventh General Conference of the Methodist Church*, 1922, 20. Most were missionary teachers and specialists in domestic science and girls' work employed by the several institutional churches and Italian missions.

<sup>39</sup> *Minutes*, 1896, Toronto Conference, 66

<sup>40</sup> *Bulletin*, 1917-18, 43

order, despite promoters' initial vigorous efforts in this direction. Between 1894 and 1904 32 per cent of the women entering the work were nurse deaconesses or nurse candidates. Between 1916 and 1926, however, the percentage dropped to 4. The dramatic increase in the number of Canadian nurses after 1900, an indication that other training institutions were meeting the country's need, partially accounts for the decline in percentage.<sup>41</sup> So too does the difficulty promoters experienced keeping nurse deaconesses in the ranks. During the early years especially, nurse candidates trained at American Methodist Episcopal deaconess hospitals. Yet an estimated two-thirds to three-quarters of these women did not return to Canadian deaconess work.<sup>42</sup> The desire to establish a similar facility in Toronto remained constant, but increasingly, promoters recruited trained nurses to meet the specific needs of the few Methodist institutions which required them.<sup>43</sup> Again, however, nurse deaconesses on average served for shorter periods of time than did other deaconesses. Clearly, Canadian deaconess work held limited appeal for women with a marketable skill (see Table 1).

The surviving biographical data, although meagre, support this contention. Promoters were intensely pragmatic, recognizing that their first priority was to supply the demand for any number of deaconesses; nevertheless, they sought a particular kind of woman. But their dream of creating an élite cadre of well-educated 'women of means'<sup>44</sup> was for the most part unrealized. Only a tiny number of deaconesses, it seems, attended university or normal school, and some had only public school education, the minimum requirement for entry into the work until late in its history. The majority of deaconesses probably spent several years in high school or went to night school, business school, or model school. In contrast, American and Canadian missionary work attracted highly qualified women teachers, nurses, and physicians<sup>45</sup> whose professional competence in turn heightened

<sup>41</sup> M.C. Urquhart and K.A.H. Buckley, eds, *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Toronto 1971), 42

<sup>42</sup> *Methodist Magazine*, LIX (June 1904), 568

<sup>43</sup> The rumour of a Toronto Methodist hospital, to be funded largely by Massey money, was last recorded in 1920. *ARDS*, 1920, Toronto Conference Deaconess Aid Society, 52

<sup>44</sup> *ARDS*, 1897-8, Deaconess Aid Society, 6. See also *Christian Guardian*, 26 Feb. 1890, 136; *Methodist Magazine*, LIX (Mar. 1904), 208-10; LXII (Nov. 1905), 475; *ARDS*, 1899-1900, Deaconess Aid Society, 8-9

<sup>45</sup> Ruth Compton Brouwer, 'Women as Foreign Missionaries in Central Canadian Presbyterianism, 1876-1896: Context and Personal Background' (Ph.D. II paper, York University 1981), 25-34; and 'Single Women as Overseas Missionaries for Central Canadian Presbyterianism, 1876-1914: Aspects of Personal Background



TABLE I  
Deaconesses: Years in Active Service<sup>a</sup>

	Number entering the work	20 years+	11-19	6-10	3-5	0-2
1894-1904	68 29%	8 12%	4 6%	14 21%	16 24%	26 38%
1905-1915	125 53%	16 13%	7 6%	20 16%	41 33%	41 33%
1916-1926	42 18%	10 24%	6 14%	3 7%	9 21%	14 33%
Total	235 100%	34 14%	17 7%	37 16%	66 28%	81 34%

  

Deaconess Nurses and Nurse Candidates <sup>b</sup>						
Total	32 (14% of Order)	1 3%	1 3%	8 25%	11 34%	11 34%

<sup>a</sup>SOURCES: Yearly stationing lists, *Annual Report of the Deaconess Society*, from 1894-5 to 1921 and 1922; *Methodist Year Book*, 1922-5; United Church of Canada, *Minutes of the Conferences*, 1926-46. Strictly speaking, the appellation deaconess should be reserved for the 125 women who completed probation and were licensed, set apart, or designated (all three terms were used). However, because surviving records rarely distinguish between probationers and licensed deaconesses, I have included probationers in my definition of the term. 'Years in Active Service' excludes leaves of absence for any reason and conforms to the Society's use of the phrase. All percentages have been rounded.

<sup>b</sup>This sub-group demonstrates the difficulty the order had keeping women with a marketable skill.

the status of missionary work. Most revealing, eight deaconesses left the order to become home or foreign missionaries. Missionary work also yielded a higher degree of satisfaction than did deaconess work, as witnessed by the longer periods of time that missionaries remained in the field. Because it made comparatively less use of women's skills, offering them neither the prestige and adventure nor the financial

and Motivation' (paper presented at the Workshop on Canadian Missionaries and East Asia, 27 Apr. 1983, Toronto), 3-6. Similar detailed research has yet to be done on Methodist missionaries. My familiarity with the sources leads me to conclude that they approached but did not equal the educational attainments of their Presbyterian counterparts. See uca, *Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Church*, box 4, *Missionaries of the WMS of the Methodist Church in Canada, 1882-1924*. See also Valentin Rabe, *The Home Base of American China Missions, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA 1978), 93-103.

rewards and greater independence of missionary work, the diaconate occupied a lower rung on the ladder of women's church work.<sup>46</sup>

Missionary work's greater attractiveness to the daughters of professionals and clergymen notwithstanding,<sup>47</sup> the available data suggest that the diaconate recruited the bulk of its membership from the same socio-economic stratum. Like missionaries, deaconesses were often the daughters of farmers and skilled workers. Just as the families of such men assisted in the establishment of a son, so also must they have aided a daughter in the pursuit of a respectable church calling by helping with the approximately \$100 yearly cost of the training school and later by contributing towards expenses in the field. Not surprisingly, deaconesses were predominantly Ontario-born and came as often from farms and communities under 1,000 in population as from larger centres. Several counties, notably Huron and Simcoe, produced more than their fair share of deaconesses, and several deaconesses were related to clergymen and missionaries, suggesting the importance of community and family in determining the decision of women to enter the order. Before entry, some deaconesses had been nurses and teachers, others had held clerical and factory jobs, and not a few had remained at home, no doubt to assist aging parents and brothers and sisters with families. Many women, when they became deaconess probationers, were above the mean age at which women married,<sup>48</sup> suggesting that for some the order seemed a suitable alternative to spinsterhood. In sum, then, the women who became deaconesses appear to have been born into pious and supportive families of the middling sort, and having foregone the blessings and burdens of marriage at least for the time being, drew on a modest - but within the context of the times a nevertheless substantial - education when they began the work (see Table 2).

Deaconess work, like other forms of service to the Church, required of its practitioners several distinct qualities. Prospective candidates, who generally were required to be between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-five, had to demonstrate a sincere interest in church and benevolent work. A former dressmaker, for instance, credited her

46 Two American historians have phrased the dilemma of deaconess work best: 'Clearly,' they write, 'the movement failed to attract enough women of talent or to employ the full talents of women.' Virginia Lieson Brereton and Christina Ressemeyer Klein, 'American Women in Ministry,' *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Reuther and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York 1979), 310.

47 Brouwer, 'Single Women as Overseas Missionaries,' 3-6.

48 The mean age of marriage for women in 1921 was 25. Urquhart and Buckley, *Historical Statistics*, 32.



TABLE 2  
Deaconesses: Biography<sup>a</sup>

	Number of cases (235 = 100%)	
Home	129 (55%)	Ontario 98 (76%) Other provinces and Newfoundland 20 (16%) United States 9 (7%) Great Britain 2 (2%)
Rural-urban <sup>b</sup>	118	Rural 60 (51%) Urban 58 (49%)
Occupation, male head of household	25 (11%)	Farmer 17 (68%) Skilled worker <sup>c</sup> 6 (24%) Labourer 2 (8%)
Education	32 (14%)	University/Normal School 2 (6%) Matriculation/teaching certificate 7 (22%) Some high school/other 19 (59%) Public school 3 (9%)
Previous occupation	26 (11%)	Teaching/nursing 4 (15%) Clerical/other 12 (46%) Home/not reporting 10 (38%)
Age upon becoming a deaconess probationer	60 (26%)	Mean age 27.35 31 years+ 24 (40%) 26-30 20 (33%) 22-25 6 (27%)

<sup>a</sup>The United Church Archives, Toronto, has biographical files for 48 deaconesses, 15 of which proved very useful. Other information was gleaned from the Deaconess Society Minutes and *Annual Reports*, the 1881 *Census of Ontario*, county atlases, and city directories. Women who served for long periods and who were born before 1881 are overrepresented. Percentages have been rounded.

<sup>b</sup>Excludes USA, Great Britain. Urban is defined as 1,000 in population

<sup>c</sup>Includes tailor, machinist, builder, carpenter, postmaster, blacksmith

understanding of the needs of working women as a motive for her entry into the order.<sup>49</sup> Most important, however, was the candidate's conviction that she had been consecrated to the work by a deeply felt religious impulse. Consecration 'alone will ensure true success,' a deaconess prophesied: 'Unless this be so burdens will weigh her down, and discouragements will overwhelm her.'<sup>50</sup> The sink-or-swim, practical bent of deaconess training tested a candidate's commitment.

49 UCA, Ida Ethel Johnstone Biography File, Biography form, 192?

50 ARDS, 1899-1900, Deaconess Aid Society, 6

Students attended classes and spent Sundays and three afternoons a week engaged in visiting and institutional church work. Until 1908, when another year of similar training was introduced, probationers spent a second year simultaneously pursuing a reading course and full-time work in the field. Upon completion of the course of study and after two years of active service, probationers were eligible to become licensed, or set apart.<sup>51</sup>

When a *Bulletin* advised prospective deaconesses that 'all study will be conducted in the spirit of scientific thoroughness and fairness, yet it will be reverent and conservative,' it was expressing the Training School's modernist philosophy.<sup>52</sup> In particular, a growing interest in the social sciences over time considerably professionalized the curriculum. During the early years classes and readings focused on Bible study, religious history, and women's church and benevolent work. By 1903 students devoted approximately half of their class time to Bible study and related subjects, one-quarter to the Department of Methods and Practical Work, and the remaining one-quarter mostly to two other departments: applied Christianity (sociology, temperance, and missions) and aesthetics (literature, deportment, and physical education). By 1920, however, Bible study and Christian philosophy filled only one-quarter of a prospective deaconess's timetable, about equal to the weight given to household science or to sociology and social service (social investigation, childhood development, methods of Christian work).<sup>53</sup>

Stimulating the Training School's appetite for the social sciences was the Social Gospel. Although it lent its name to a broad spectrum of religious reformist thought, rigorously defined the Social Gospel proclaimed the temporal and transcending precedence of social salvation over individual salvation and sought the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth through the application of collective solutions to the ills of society.<sup>54</sup> Few men and women subscribed to such a major reinterpretation of the Christian message without first qualifying their support. The Reverend Samuel Wesley Dean, the Training School's pioneer sociology teacher, maintained that 'unregenerate humanity will revert to its former state despite changes in environment ... It is desirable that the transformation of the individual and the environ-

51 ARDS, 1894-5, 8-11; DSBM 4, 8 Apr. 1908, 5

52 *Bulletin*, 1920-1, 12

53 ARDS, 1894-5-1909-10; *Calendars and Bulletins* 1910-11-1924. Interested students also attended courses given by the University of Toronto Social Service Department. DSBM 4, 16 Apr. 1915, 45

54 William Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, MA 1976), 165



ment should go forward, side by side.<sup>55</sup> His successor, the Reverend John Walker MacMillan, was in substantial agreement. Students in MacMillan's Social Gospel course learned that 'the redemption of society involves both the rebuilding of each person and of the forms of human association. The problems of the individual and of the institutions of group life are to be solved concurrently.'<sup>56</sup>

When translated into the language of political economy, the Training School gospel was an evangelical variant of liberal reform capitalism. 'Equality in results may never come,' Dean declared, 'but equality in opportunity can be improved.' Among other measures, Dean and MacMillan advocated workmen's compensation, unemployment insurance, and 'the right of the toiler to a more equitable share in the wealth which he or she produces.'<sup>57</sup> Their teachings would never meet the standards set by Alice Chown, a feminist and a champion of working women's rights, who in 1911 roundly criticized the deaconess movement for its inattention to the structural roots of poverty.<sup>58</sup> Like the nascent social work profession, the Training School focused attention less on social inequality than it did on the individual's failure to master his social environment.<sup>59</sup> With some justification, however, a promoter responded to Chown's attack by arguing that it was the responsibility of others to design a more perfect society. The role of the deaconess was 'to work lest the unfortunate perish while they wait.'<sup>60</sup> She helped her clients to evolve a Christian conscience, the highest manifestation of goodness, and she brought to bear the full weight of scientific method on the many problems they faced.<sup>61</sup>

Deaconesses were proud exponents of the Training School's holistic approach to the needs of the individual. Its practice distinguished their role from that of the secular charity worker and from that of the church worker untrained in the social sciences.<sup>62</sup> So too could one

55 UCA, *Annual Report of the Toronto City and Fred Victor Mission Society of the Methodist Church* 1909, 6; Social Service Council of Canada, *The Social Service Congress of Canada*, 1914 (Toronto 1914), 130.

56 *Calendar* 1920-1, 21-2.

57 *Annual Report, Fred Victor Mission*, 1909, 6; John Walker MacMillan Obituary, *New Outlook*, 21 Dec. 1932, 1202. The quote is from Dean, *Social Service Congress*, 132.

58 J.S. Woodsworth, who would soon leave the Church and eventually enter labour politics, was in substantial agreement. For the entire debate see *Christian Guardian*, 15 Nov. 1911, 24-5, to 20 Dec. 1911, 25-7.

59 J.M. Pitsula, 'The Relief of Poverty in Toronto 1880-1930' (Ph.D. thesis, York University 1979), 288.

60 *Christian Guardian*, 22 Nov. 1911, 34-5.

61 George Herbert Palmer, *The Nature of Goodness* (Boston and New York 1903); ARDS, 1919-20, 10-11.

62 *Christian Guardian*, 1 Mar. 1916, 18; UCA, Eva B. Elliot Biography File, Elliot to Winnifred Thomas, 18 Dec. 1926; ARDS, 1915-16, Hamilton Conference, 6.

deaconess, reflecting the normative evolutionary and sexist assumptions of the day, herald the Training School as a corrective to the long history of unequal educational opportunities for women and a harbinger of 'mental equality' between the sexes.<sup>63</sup> As a textbook reminded Training School students, however, 'it is by no means certain that society can afford or that women ought to demand individualistic rights that will put in jeopardy the welfare of the remainder of the family.' Women were entitled to the rights of person, property, and a 'fair share of social responsibility.' But just as the doctrines of employers' control and collective control must give way to the harmonious doctrine of co-operation among capital, labour, management, and government, so too did the public good require that women relinquish their claim to a status that further unravelled the fabric of family ties.<sup>64</sup> Even in its most progressive forms, then, the social thought of the deaconess movement did not abandon its fundamental allegiance to familiar institutions and traditional sex roles. Neither libertarian nor radically egalitarian, it was a poor seedbed for the development of a feminist consciousness. Nevertheless, after 1911 events and changing perceptions conspired to alter significantly the relationship of deaconesses to the Church.

That year deaconess work began its decline. During the next fifteen years its proportion of the funds raised yearly by Methodism remained relatively constant, but by 1926 the rising costs of the work and the ravages of war, depression, apathy, and dissatisfaction – all had combined to cut the number of deaconesses in active service to forty-seven, less than three-fifths the number at work in 1910.<sup>65</sup> Paralleling this decline, in some ways contributing to it and in other ways feeding on it, was the demise of the volunteer ethic upon which the work had been based. Increasingly, deaconesses sought to change the conditions under which they worked. The urban environment they laboured in, and the self-sacrificial ethos to which their status encouraged them to subscribe, often made them prey to sickness and exhaustion.<sup>66</sup> They also faced a maze of conflicting commitments. The demands of their clients notwithstanding, deaconesses answered to the pastor, the ladies' aids and the church boards which employed and supervised them, the General Board of Management which stationed them, and the deaconess superintendents of the local Homes who

63 *Christian Guardian*, 5 Apr. 1916, 16.

64 Henry Kalloch Rowe, *Society: Its Origins and Development* (New York 1916), 72, 197-9.

65 DSBM 5, 4 June 1926, 89-90; ARDS, 1909-10, x.

66 During 1910-11, an untypical year, 8 deaconesses were granted sick leave and 1 died. DSBM 4, 4 Apr. 1911, 15.





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